WHY WE PLANT CHURCHES
Adventist® Mission

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Setting the scene...

The South Pacific Division (SPD) has the highest ratio of Seventh-day Adventists to general population of any Division in the world. Currently, the Adventist ratio is 1:55 Division-wide.

We can thank God for what is happening in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the Pacific Islands.

When it comes to Australia and New Zealand, however, the picture is very different. According to the 2021 Australian census, there were 63,662 people who identified as Adventist. This is an increase of only 717 people since 2016 (62,945). However, during that same time period, there were 3,700 immigrants who came into Australia and identified as Adventist.

In other words, without immigration, those identifying as Adventist in Australia would have decreased by 2,983 in the 2017-2021 period.[1]

As a proportion of the Australian population, the number of people identifying as Seventh-day Adventist reached its peak in 1998 at 0.33 per cent of the population. It has since declined to 0.25% (2021 census).[2]

REALITY CHECK

We currently baptise less than one *thousand* people for every one *million* people in Australia.

With a population just over 27 million, to reach just 3% of Australia at an average of 200 people per church we would need...

Over 4050 new churches.

So, what do we do about this current rate of church-growth in Australian and New Zealand? This little booklet will point out that ***church planting*** is a key way the Holy Spirit intends the Adventist Church to grow.

We will briefly look at the biblical reasons for planting churches and see how the early Adventist Church emphasised church planting. It is the stated belief that for us to become a *movement* again in Australia and New Zealand, we need to return to our biblical and historical roots, and start planting churches.

COMMON CONCERNS ABOUT CHURCH PLANTING

Responses to a discussion about church planting often raise the following concerns:

1. WE ALREADY HAVE PLENTY OF EXISTING CHURCHES.
Why don't we revitalise the ones that we have, before we plant more? If you plant a new church, you will drain the existing churches of resources—both people and money

2. MOST CHURCHES ARE IN DECLINE.
The reality is less people are going to church. If you plant a church, you will just take people from a nearby declining church that is already hurting, and weaken everyone

3. A PARISH MINDSET.
This is the idea that there must only be one church per geographical area. The sentiment says, "We already have a church in this area, so a new church would only encroach on another church's territory."

4. CHURCH BUILDINGS ARE EXPENSIVE.
Although the gospel is often needed most in big cities, buildings are most expensive in these areas. We simply don't have enough money.

5. THE PROFESSIONAL PASTOR MINDSET.
This is the idea that only professional, full-time pastors should plant churches. Unfortunately, the Adventist Church is already struggling to pay for its existing pastors, let alone pay for more ordained pastors to plant churches.

6. CHURCH PLANTS ONLY ARISE FROM FIGHTING.
Some church plants start because of fights and splits (e.g. over worship styles). Why would we want to plant churches that started from a fight?

7. HOW CAN WE ENSURE THE CHURCH WILL BE ADVENTIST?
If we start a new church, how do we know it is going to be doctrinally pure and loyal to the teachings of the Adventist Church?

Quotes from Adventist objectors

"A term that has been given major influence in recent years is church planting, with an accompanying emphasis on church growth. While both of these terms are on the surface benign, they carry with them an inherent danger—they are doctrinally neutral (in other words, generic)."

RICHARD W. O'FFILL [3]

"Prediction #3: Adventist churches that have been copying the seeker-friendly model (we call some of them, "church plantings") will either fade, as many have in this country and in Australia especially, or they will follow the crowd into New Spirituality."

HERBERT EDGAR DOUGLASS, TH.D.[4]

The above statements do appear to make common sense to many people, but they make several incorrect assumptions. The mistakes in this type of thinking will become clear if we ask, "Why is church planting so crucially important?"

Why is church planting so important?

TIM KELLER PUT IT THIS WAY:

"The vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for

1) the numerical growth of the Body of Christ in any city, and
2) the continual corporate renewal and revival of the existing churches in a city.

Nothing else—not crusades, outreach programs, para-church ministries, growing mega-churches, congregational consulting, nor church renewal processes—will have the consistent impact of dynamic, extensive church planting. This is an eyebrow raising statement. But to those who have done any study at all, it is not even controversial."[5]

ELLEN WHITE PUT IT THIS WAY:

"Upon all who believe, God has placed the burden of raising up churches." [6]

"New churches must be established..." [7]

"The work in the cities is the essential work for this time." [8]

WE PLANT CHURCHES BECAUSE WE WANT TO BE TRUE TO THE BIBLICAL MANDATE AND TO OUR HISTORICAL ADVENTIST, MISSIONAL ROOTS.

IN DEFENCE OF CHURCH PLANTING

1. Our Theology of God

God is Trinity—Three in One. If our God was, at some stage in eternity, a singular being, He would have been alone. As such, His first characteristic could not have been love; it would, out of necessity, have been power. As a solitary being, He would have needed to use power to create something before He could love it.

However, an important characteristic of our triune God is that He is love (1 John 4:16). In Himself, He is a community of love, and out of that community, He created humans as His image.

We were made as God's image, and in creating the first human God said, "It is not good for humans to be alone" (Gen 2:18). Man of course, was not alone. He had God, but God said this was not enough. So, He created another human being to be with Adam and God. Humans, as God's image, should be in loving community as He is. It wasn't until God made another human being that He said that it was "very good" (Gen 1:28).

Planting churches helps us demonstrate that we were made as God's image and that allows us to replicate His loving community all around the world.

2. Our Ecclesiology

The church is very important to Christ so it should be to us. Consider the following realities:

- Christ bought the church with His blood (Acts 20:28)
- The church is the body of Christ (Col 1:18)
- The church is Christ's fullness (Eph 1:22).
- Each new church is a new expression of Christ that was bought by His blood, is His body and is His fullness in the world.

"The church exists for nothing else but to draw people into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simple a waste of time. God became man for no other purpose"—*C.S. Lewis* [9]

3. Our Missiology

A. CHURCH PLANTING IS IMPLICIT WITHIN THE GOSPEL COMMISSION

(Matt 28:17-20)

The Gospel Commission is not just to "make disciples', but to also baptise disciples. We are baptised into Christ and join His body, the church. Part of baptism is incorporating people into a worshipping community with accountability, teaching and boundaries (Acts 2:41-47). If we are to continue to baptise new people, we will need new churches to disciple them.

B. WE ARE CALLED TO MAKE DISCIPLES

If we are not making disciples, we are not "being church". The reality is that disciples grow best within communities of faith. New churches are best placed to reach new generations, changing demographics, new people groups and new residents.

Younger generations have always been found disproportionally in new churches. Long-established congregations develop traditions like time of worship, length of service, sermon topics, leadership style, emotional atmosphere, and thousands of other tiny customs, that reflect established generations. The automatic maintenance of such habits often doesn't reach younger generations.

Younger generations, new residents and immigrants are almost always reached better in new churches. Older congregations often have established leadership, ministries and structures that can take years to allow others to participate.

New immigrants are nearly always reached best by churches ministering in their own language. While care needs to be taken to integrate new immigrants into the wider church community and wider culture, initially new churches that speak in their own languages are needed.

C. NEW CHURCHES BEST REACH THE UNCHURCHED SECULAR-POST CHRISTIAN

Dozens of denominational studies have confirmed that the average new church gains most of its new members (60–80 per cent) from the ranks of people who are not attending any worshipping body. Churches over ten to fifteen years of age gain 80 to 90 per cent of new members by transfer from other congregations. This means the average new congregation will bring six to eight times more new people into the life of the body of Christ than an older congregation of the same size.

Although established congregations provide many things that newer churches often cannot, older churches in general will never be able to match

the effectiveness of new bodies in reaching people for the kingdom. Why would this be?

As a congregation ages, powerful internal institutional pressures lead it to allocate most of its resources and energy toward the concerns of its members and constituents, rather than toward those outside its walls. This is natural and, to a great degree, desirable. Older congregations have a stability and steadiness that many people thrive on and need. This does not mean that established churches cannot win new people. In fact, many non-Christians will be reached only by churches with long roots in the community and the marks of stability and respectability.

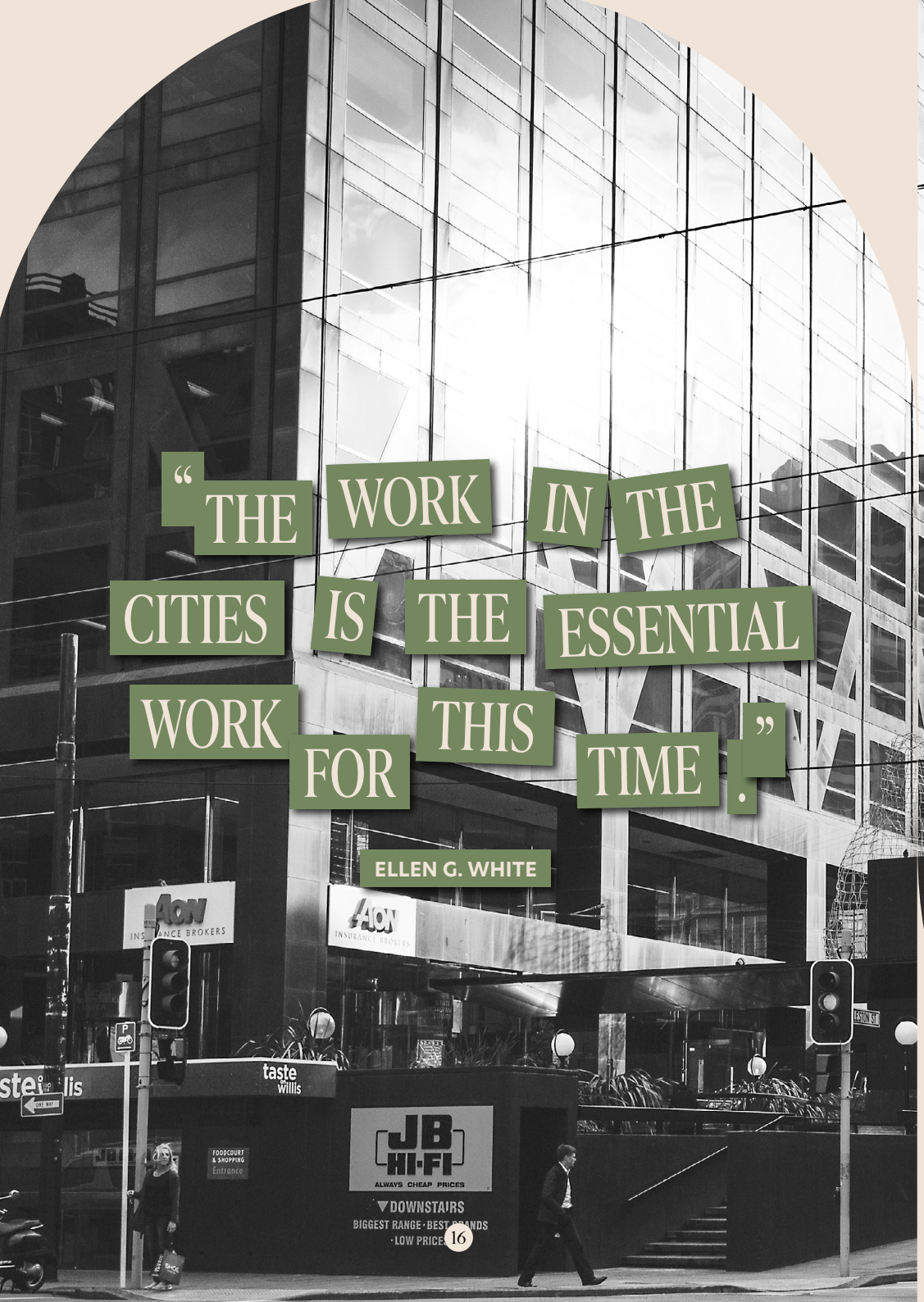
On the other hand, new congregations, in general, are forced to focus on the needs of their non-members, simply to get off the ground. Because so many of a new church's leaders come from the ranks of the recently-unchurched, the congregation is far more sensitive to nonbelievers' concerns. Also, in the first two years of our Christian life, we have far more close, face-to-face relationships with non-Christians than we do later. A congregation filled with people fresh from the ranks of the unchurched will thus have the power to invite and attract many more nonbelievers into the church's life and events than a typical established church typically will.

What does this mean, practically? If we want to reach our city, should we try to renew older congregations to make them more evangelistic, or should we plant lots of new churches? That question presumes a false either-or dichotomy. We should do both! Nevertheless, the above shows that, despite the occasional exceptions, the only broad-scale way to bring many new Christians into the body of Christ in a permanent way is to plant new churches.

To throw this into relief, imagine that Town A, Town B, and Town C are the same size, and they each have a hundred churches of one hundred people each. In Town A, all the churches are more than fifteen years old. The overall number of active Christian churchgoers in that town is shrinking, even if four or five of the churches get very "hot" and double in attendance. In Town B, five of the churches are fewer than fifteen years old. They, along with several older congregations, are winning new people to Christ, but this only offsets the normal declines of the older churches. Thus the overall number of active Christian churchgoers in that town is staying the same. Finally, in Town C, thirty of the churches are under fifteen years old. In this town, the overall number of active Christian churchgoers is on a path to grow 50 percent in a generation.[10]

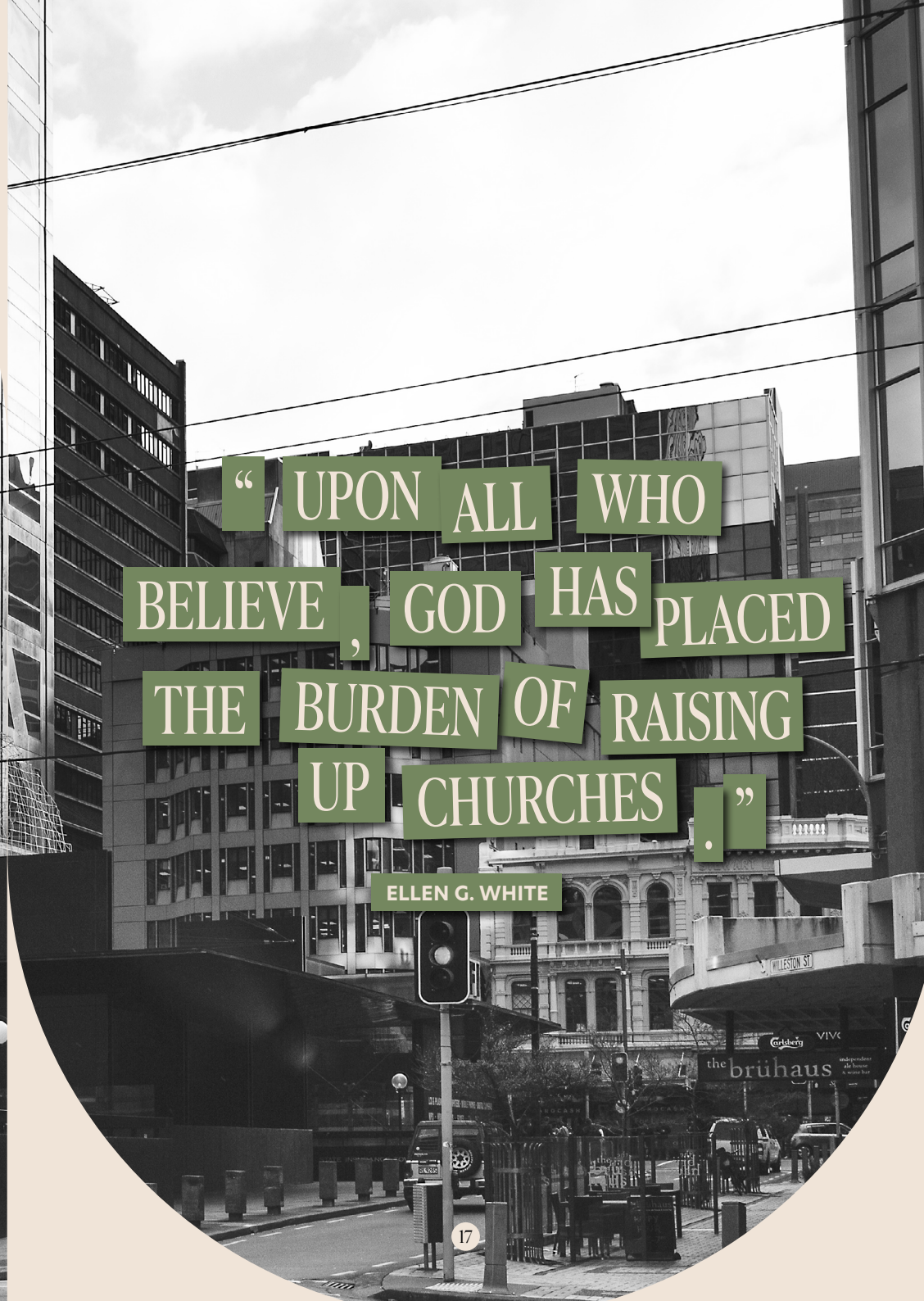
A person is physically mature when he or she can reproduce. A church, is mature when it can reproduce. Once a church reaches around 80 per cent full, it plateaus.[11] In order to thrive, it needs to plant a new church. Many churches have been plateaued for years. If a church does not reproduce, it plateaus and dies.

It is easier to give birth than raise the dead. While not impossible, it is easier to start a new church than try and revitalise a dead or dying church.



"THE WORK IN THE CITIES IS THE ESSENTIAL WORK FOR THIS TIME."

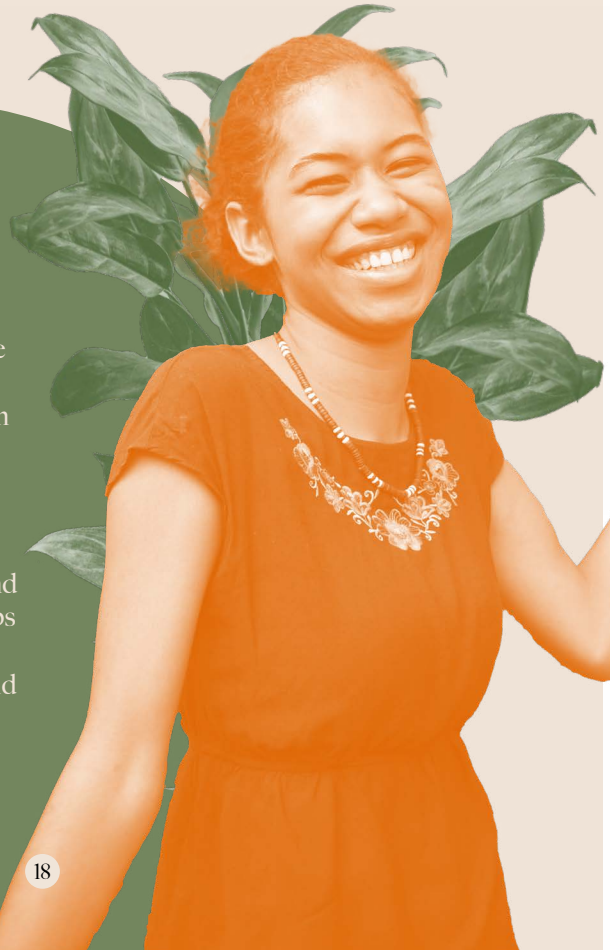
ELLEN G. WHITE



"UPON ALL WHO BELIEVE, GOD HAS PLACED THE BURDEN OF RAISING UP CHURCHES."

ELLEN G. WHITE

A BIBLICAL HISTORY OF CHURCH PLANTING



"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8)

The above command by Jesus starts with the Holy Spirit giving power and then the disciples are given clear steps to follow as His witnesses. They are to go to Jerusalem and then Judea and Samaria and then to the end of the earth. The book of Acts follows this journey.

Church planting in the New Testament

1. JERUSALEM

The first part of Acts has the giving of the promised Holy Spirt (Acts 2) Then disciples are being added daily in Jerusalem (Acts 2:47). Then 5000 men hear the word and believe, (Acts 4:4).

Next we have the number of disciples, not being added but being multiplied, along with many priests (Acts 6:7).

2. JUDEA AND SAMARIA (ACTS 8-12)

The disciples stay in Jerusalem. It is not until persecution breaks out with the stoning of Stephen, about five years after Jesus' resurrection that the command of God to go to Judea and Samaria is fulfilled. The mission of going to Judea and Samaria does not happen as a result of any strategic plan of the Apostles. It happens as a result of persecution.

What is interesting, is that is the church members—who although being persecuted and scattered throughout Judea and Samaria—preach the word. The Apostles stay in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1,4). When the Apostles hear that Samaria has received the word of God by Philip, a Deacon, they send Peter and John to check it out and give the Apostles blessing (Acts 8:5-25). Only then do Peter and John preach to the Samaritans. Philip the Deacon is then used to witness to the Ethiopian eunuch.

Churches multiplied. It is important to note that the book of Acts moves from disciples being added, to disciples being multiplied, to the church multiplying (Acts 2:47; 6:7; 9:47). This church multiplication was done by church members as they spread out over Judea and Samaria as a result of persecution.

3. SALVATION EXTENDED TO THE GENTILES (ACTS 8:26-40; 10-11:18)

Firstly, there are individual Gentiles reached with the gospel—the Ethiopian Eunuch by Philip, and then Cornelius by Peter. It is interesting that Peter has

to defend himself for being involved in the conversion of a Gentile to the Jewish leaders.

4. CHURCH PLANTING IN THE WORLD (ACTS 13-28)

The final command of Jesus to go to the ends of the earth is finally heeded by church members starting Jewish churches outside of Jerusalem (Acts 11:19). Then church members from Jerusalem plant a Gentile-Jewish church in Antioch (Acts 11:20-21).

5. ANTIOCH BECAME THE GREAT MISSIONARY CHURCH (ACTS 13:2,3)

It is from Antioch that the missionary journeys of Paul and his team begin, and then also Barnabas who separates from Paul and starts his own church planting team. The rest of Acts is essentially Paul's three missionary journeys (Acts 13-18).

Paul's whole strategy was to plant urban churches

The greatest missionary in Scripture, some would say in all of history, is Paul. He had a simple twofold strategy. First, he went into the largest city of a region (Acts 16:9, 12), and second, he planted churches in each city (Titus 1:5—"appoint elders in every town"). Once Paul had done that, he could say that he had "fully preached" the gospel in a region and that he had "no more place... to work in these regions" (Rom 15:19, 23). This means Paul had two controlling assumptions:

> (a) that the way to most permanently influence a country was through its chief cities, and;
> (b) the way to most permanently influence a city was to plant churches in it.

Once he had accomplished this in a city, he moved on. He knew that the rest that needed to happen would follow.[12] We need to realise that most of the New Testament was written to church plants!

ADVENTIST HERITAGE OF CHURCH PLANTING

THE ADVENTIST CHURCH STARTED AS A CHURCH PLANTING MOVEMENT.

Adventists had few, if any churches at the beginning of their movement and numbered just 0.2 per cent of former Millerites.[13] Today the church has over 25 Million people in 212 countries.

While the early Adventists had a clear sense of mission, they faced serious challenges. Many had been shunned by their former churches, or like Ellen White and her family (nee Harmon), were excommunicated from their churches. Himes wrote about the Millerites as early as 1842 that "we were exceedingly blamed, censured, judged, and condemned, shut out of most pulpits." [14]

The early Adventists had no organisational structure.[15] There were three specific organisational elements that the early Adventists introduced that helped facilitate and emphasise church planting.

Firstly, there was the decision to have all property and buildings owned by the corporate Church. Various individuals had owned the property where people worshipped. When disagreements arose between the owners of the property the owners would throw the believers off the property. "In Cincinnati when the owner of the lot on which the Adventist tabernacle was built became disaffected, he turned the little house dedicated to God into a vinegar factory." [16]

Second, was to have ordained and accredited pastors. The first reason that pastors became accredited was because, as Knight states, "the major problem... faced in the early 1850's was that they had no systematic defence against impostors." [17] Some impostors also had as their aim to "fleece the saints financially." [18] Having accredited ordained pastors was one issue; the second was their role. The pastors role was to do evangelism and church planting. It is important to note that for the first sixty years of its history, the Adventist Church existed without "settled pastors over churches." [19] The pastors role was to evangelise and plant churches.

This is where the ***third*** innovative organisational element introduced by the early Adventist Church contributed to church planting. A tithing system was adopted by the Church in 1876. The innovation that impacted church planting was that all tithes would not go to the local church but to the local conference. "Churches sent their tithe to the conference to support the clergy who were raising up new churches." [20]

As the local church often did not know the whereabouts of their pastor, the practice of sending tithe to the local conference was established. The local conference was the one place where people would know where the pastor was.[21]

These three organisational innovations that we still have today—the corporate Church owning all land and buildings, having accredited ordained pastors and tithing going to the local conference and not the local church—were all initiated to support church planting.

Ellen White's instructions on church planting

The SEEDS Conference was an annual intensive series of seminars and workshops on church planting held at Andrews University. In 2009, at the first SEEDS Conference, Dr Robert Logan a Baptist pastor and church planter, was invited to speak and chose the topic, "Returning Home: The DNA of Jesus."

There were some attending who were concerned that a Baptist pastor was invited to speak to an Adventist audience on church planting. His talk didn't start well when he asked the Adventist audience, "Who here is a believer? After a bit of an embarrassed silence hands were raised. Dr Logan paused and then stated, "Upon all who believe, God has placed the burden of raising up churches." [22]

YOU CAN PLANT CHURCHES WITHOUT MAKING DISCIPLES, BUT YOU CANNOT MAKE DISCIPLES WITHOUT EVENTUALLY PLANTING CHURCHES.

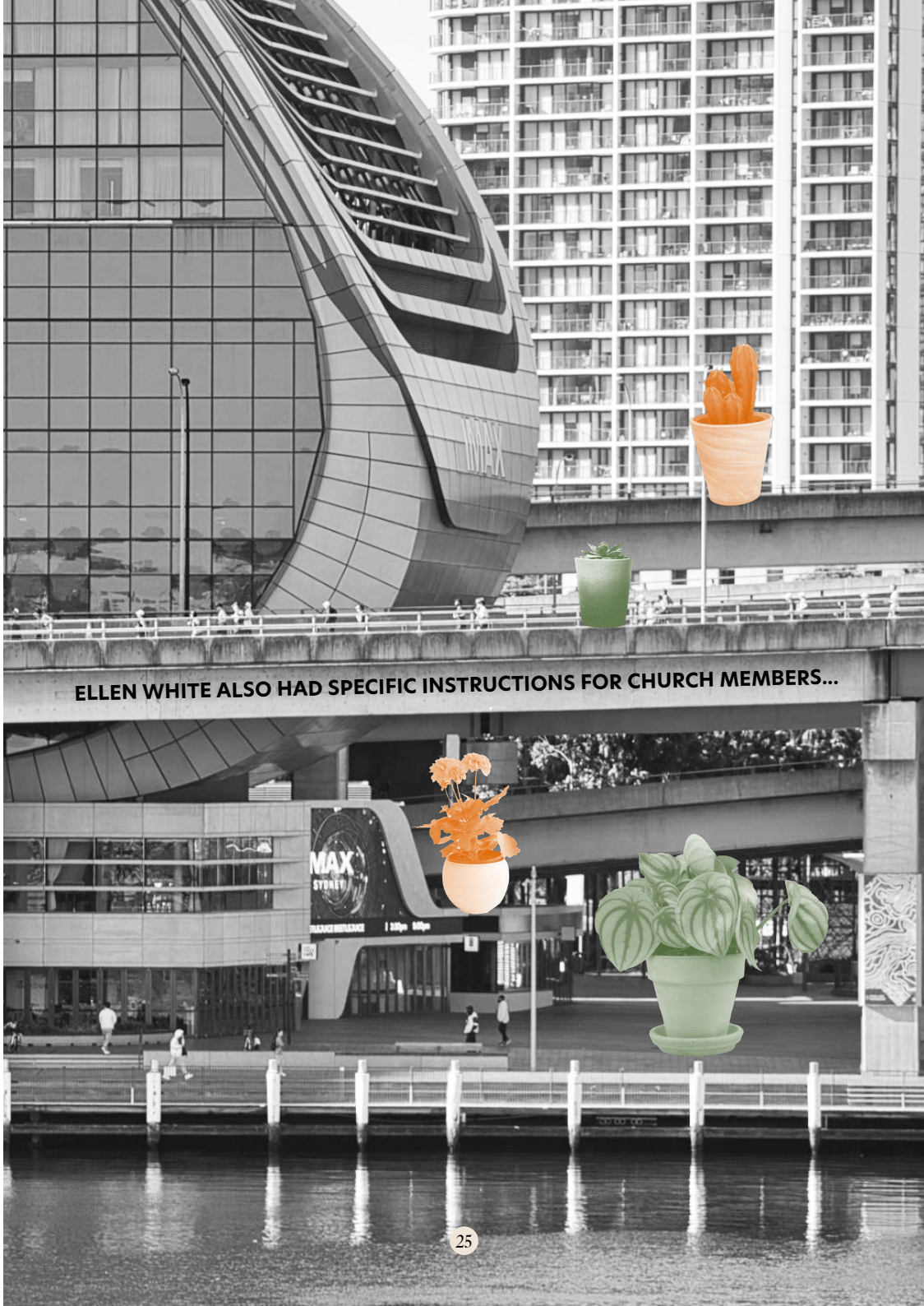
Dr Logan quoted Ellen White to this audience. He knew Ellen Whites view on church planting better than many in the audience. White's statement indicates that she expected all Adventists to be involved in "raising up churches."

The raising up of churches was not the goal in itself. You can plant churches without making disciples, but you cannot make disciples without eventually planting churches. Ellen White stated that churches were to be raised up for the "express purpose of educating men and women to use their entrusted capabilities for the benefit of the world... Gladly and generously they are to use the means in their possession for the advancement of righteousness and truth." [23] Mission was to be the goal, church planting was a means to reach that goal.

"New churches must be established, new congregations organised ..." [24]

"The world is our field of missionary toil... In all countries and cities the gospel is to be proclaimed... Churches are to be organised, and plans laid for work to be done by the members of the newly-organised churches." [25]

Ellen White knew that multiple churches would be needed to effectively reach all people.
"In every city where the truth is proclaimed, churches are to be raised up. In some large cities there must be churches in various parts of the city." [26]
"Place after place is to be visited, church after church is to be raised up." [27]



ELLEN WHITE HAD SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS FOR CHURCH MEMBERS:

One

"As churches are established, it should be set before them that it is even from among them that men must be taken to carry the truth to others and raise new churches." [28]

Two

"The lay members of our churches can accomplish a work which, as yet, they have scarcely begun. None should move into new places merely for the sake of worldly advantage; but where there is opening to obtain a livelihood, let families that are well grounded in the truth enter, one or two families in a place, to work as missionaries." [29]

Ellen White was not the only church pioneer who stressed the importance of church planting.

JAMES WHITE WROTE ABOUT THOSE WHO WANTED TO BECOME PASTORS IN THE FOLLOWING WAY:

One

"In no way can a preacher so well prove himself as in entering new fields. There he can see the fruits of his labours. And if he be successful in raising up churches, and establishing them, so that they bear good fruits, he gives to his brethren the best proofs that he is sent of the Lord." [30]

James White went even further when he said:

Two

"If they cannot raise up churches and friends to sustain them, then certainly the cause of truth has no need of them, and they have made a sad mistake when they thought that God called them to teach the third angel's message." [31]

A word from the General Conference

A.G Daniells was the president of the General Conference for twenty-two years and was a contemporary of Ellen White. He was also a champion of church planting.

Immediately before he became the General Conference President he served in Australia for eight years. When he arrived in Australia in 1892 there were only seven churches. When he left eight years later, there were thirty-three churches.

In 1912, as General Conference President, he spoke at a pastors meeting in Los Angeles. In talking about the importance of church planting he described to the pastors what he said on an ordination committee looking at a name for ordination.

"Brethren, what is the record of this young man? Has he brought in a company or church this year?"
"No."

"Did he bring in any last year?"
"No."

"Has he raised up a good square church?"
"No."

"What do you want to ordain him for? Why are you going to establish him in this thing for all time to come when so far you have not any real fruit of his labor?... I sha'l (sic) object. I do not think it is right." [32]

He went on further when he said:

"A man that had been over twenty years in the ministry... had never presented one church to the conference for acceptance in the entire time. The brethren said, in considering the case, 'We do not believe this man is called to this work', and they relieved him... Something must be done with cases like this kind. They must bring some fruit. They must bring some churches to the cause of God. The man who gives evidence before his ordination must continue to give the evidence while he draws support." [33]

ACCORDING TO A. G DANIELLS: CHURCH PLANTING = FRUIT, NO CHURCH PLANTING = NO FRUIT, NO CHURCH PLANTING = SACKED.

The Sabbath Recorder.

"THE SEVENTH DAY IS THE SABBATH OF THE LORD YOUR GOD."

VOL. IV. NO. 1. NEW YORK, FIFTH-DAY, JUNE 24, 1847. WHOLE NO. 121.

A RECOGNISABLE DIFFERENCE...

In researching for his doctoral paper, Wayne Krause contacted the Seventh-day Baptists asking about their thoughts on the Adventist Church and its growth compared to theirs. In their church paper, *The Sabbath Recorder,* after they raised their confusion on why Adventists were growing and they weren't, a Seventh-day Baptist pastor wrote into the paper and said:

"All Seventh-day Adventist clergymen are missionaries... and are busy preaching, teaching, and organising churches the world over." [34]

"...preaching, teaching and organising churches."

Making disciples means planting churches

It is a sad fact that none of the New Testament churches mentioned by name in scripture, still exist today. There is no Adventist church in Antioch, Ephesus or Corinth. Indeed, none of the churches that Paul wrote to exist today. Aren't we glad that those churches, planted other churches that planted other churches, so that we are here today? You and I have never attended a church that didn't start as a church plant.

There is strong biblical evidence, and rich Adventist history which supports the essential need to plant churches. As our countries and our cities become more and more diverse, we need new churches to specifically reach those people groups.

Given the situation we face in the South Pacific Division, particularly in Australia and New Zealand, we do not have the finances to pay full time ordained pastors to plant churches. For the Adventist Church to be part of a disciple making, church planting movement, most new church plants will need to be planted by church members.

There are also financial limitations in building physical churches, especially in our major cities. We know that the early church did not have physical church building for the first two to three hundred years of its existence. Most of the New Testament was written to church plants, none of which were in church buildings. Most were in homes.[35] In the future, more and more churches will need to be planted in homes and apartments, by rivers and in parks, just like the early church.

Church planting has been called the "extreme sport of Adventism". It involves entering the unknown, with the Holy Spirit, and making disciples. As has been noted, you can plant churches but not make disciples. It is easy to transfer Adventists from one church to another. However, you cannot make disciples without eventually planting churches. If you continue to make disciples, you will need new communities to grow and develop them.

The reality is that we plant churches because Jesus commanded us to go and make disciples and disciples live and grow best in community.

SO... WHO WANTS TO PLANT A CHURCH?

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35. See for example Romans 16:5; 1Corintians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2.

Acknowledgements

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To our early church pioneers—their commitment to the gospel and making disciples through church planting is not only inspiring, but challenges us to return to our church planting roots.

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